

Beyond the breaking point: patient survey highlights NHS challenges

July 2024

Introduction

“I have complex interacting physical/mental health problems that don’t fit onto a single care pathway. No safety net for my healthcare. I feel abandoned by NHS and unsafe.”

The Patients Association's survey into patients' experiences of healthcare, carried out just before July's general election, provides compelling evidence supporting Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Wes Streeting's assessment that the NHS is broken.

Our findings reveal a healthcare system that is failing to meet patients' needs. The stark reality is clear: patients deserve far better than they currently get.

As the Secretary of State said: "It will be the mission of my department, every member of this government, and the 1.4 million people who work in the NHS, to turn our health service around".¹

Our report underscores the critical need for this mission and provides insights into the patient experiences that demonstrate why this transformation is so urgently required.

¹Streeting, W. The NHS is broken: Health and Social Care Secretary statement. 5 July 2024. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-secretary-of-state-for-health-and-social-care Accessed July 2024.

The Patients Association exists to give patients a voice – we work with patients directly, through our free helpline and commissioned programmes of work and patient surveys. We use what patients tell us to speak to the Government, the NHS and other stakeholders about patients' priorities and concerns, to ensure the patient voice is heard and acted upon.

We carried out our survey just before the general election in July to give patients the opportunity to share with us their recent experiences of health and care, and what they wanted the new Government to prioritise.

The research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 1,000 nationally representative UK Respondents (aged 16+) and 210 respondents from the Patients Association newsletter – Weekly News. The data were collected between 14th to 18th June 2024. The full methodology and results from the survey are available on the Patients Association's website.

Priorities for the new Government

Responses to the survey indicated four main priorities for the new Government:

- Prioritise public health
- Increase funding for the NHS
- Increase the number of appointments to primary care services such as NHS dental and GP appointments
- Invest in the training and recruitment of new health and care staff.

Prioritising public health

The survey found strong support for all Government departments to take steps to improve public health, with seven out of ten (71%) respondents agreeing that all Government departments should prioritise public health.

This indicates a strong desire among patients for the Government to shift towards a health-in-all policies approach, for which we have long advocated. A health-in-all policies approach is when all Government departments prioritise

health and tackle health inequalities by addressing social determinants of health in their work.

The impact of health inequalities and social determinants of health is stark. Barriers to access and patient engagement are wide ranging, nuanced and can be complex. The cost-of-living crisis, the pandemic and cuts to services and public health spending are widening health inequalities and have adversely affected patient outcomes.

However, many of the barriers facing patients, including culturally inappropriate interventions, discrimination, patient experiences and views being ignored, poor data collection, and variation in care, are long-standing and systemic.

Many factors affect people's health, including social and economic factors as well as the quality and safety of healthcare. These factors influence how long people live, how likely they are to survive illness, and their overall experience of healthcare.

These factors need to be considered when designing NHS services and creating Government policy. It is important to remember that health is not always about the NHS; health is affected by things like education, income, housing and geography so to truly improve health we need to look at the bigger picture of how our society and economy work.

Access

The results from the survey highlight some of the challenges patients have faced in accessing health and care services through the NHS. Patients are struggling to access primary care services.

- Just under a third (30%) of respondents had struggled to access GP appointments
- Almost a fifth (18%) struggled to access NHS dental services
- One in nine (11%) respondents had struggled to access ongoing treatment, either with local NHS services, in a hospital or in their own home for new, changing, or existing conditions in the past six months.

Issues with accessing services were highlighted further in responses, with one patient saying GP access was 'frustrating'. Another said they try not to go to their GP as "getting an appointment is difficult".

In response to challenges in accessing NHS care, patients have turned to private healthcare, with almost a fifth (18%) of respondents saying they had used private healthcare in the last six months (either through self-funding or NHS referral) because they had been unable to get the care they needed in the NHS.

“Unable to access asthma nurse even though the GP has requested me to do so. I know my asthma is not under control. I am going to pay privately to see a respiratory physio in next few weeks. This shouldn't be necessary but feel I have no other option.”

The Patients Association has long advocated for patient choice. We believe that if patients want and can afford to use private healthcare, they have the right to do so. However, patients should not be forced into using private healthcare because they are unable to get NHS services.

Crises in waiting times and appointment management

Our results reveal problems regarding appointment management and waiting times:

- Only around a quarter (28%) of respondents who needed care in the last six months said all their appointments went ahead as planned
- Around one in ten (13%) had one or more appointments cancelled with none rescheduled
- Around one in ten (12%) experienced a mix of cancelled and rescheduled appointments
- Just over a quarter (28%) of respondents actively disagreed that they “have not had to wait too long for health and care services”, with nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents agreeing with this statement

Negative experiences of long waits for care and the frustration caused by not being able to get necessary care are reflected in many of the respondents' comments:

“After three months, I'm still waiting for a 'rapid response' appointment for cardiology.”

“Constantly having hospital appointments cancelled. I ask them to change me to other hospitals/doctors, told yes but they never do.”

These experiences paint a picture of a system struggling to provide timely and reliable care, leaving patients in limbo and potentially exacerbating their health conditions.

Patient experience and the need for improvements in shared decision making

Despite difficulties in accessing NHS services, the survey's results show that when patients do get care and treatment, they have positive experiences with their healthcare professional. These findings are similar to our previous patient experience reports.² In the general election survey, almost three in five (58%) agreed with the statement: "The staff I have dealt with have been understanding and compassionate."

Additionally, three in five (59%) agreed that the staff they had dealt with had been competent and knowledgeable.

"[My experience has been] excellent, everyone I dealt with was courteous friendly and competent."

However, there is a clear need for a shift towards ensuring patients are consistently able to practice shared decision making and work in partnership with the professionals caring for them.

When asked about their experience with shared decision making, just over half (52%) of respondents said they felt included in decisions about their treatment and care. While this points towards positive experiences of patient partnership for many, for patients to get the best possible care, shared decision making must become common practice for all patients.

It is only by sharing decisions with informed patients that healthcare professionals can prioritise patient safety and experience.

² The Patients Association. Patient experience - Winter survey. March 2023. Available at: <https://www.patients-association.org.uk/blog/survey-of-patients-paints-a-mixed-picture-of-experiences> Accessed July 2024.

Transparency and genuine two-way communication

"Uncoordinated care at GP. Specialist nurse clinic and consultant each refer me to the other ... and no one reaches a decision about my care. Wasting everyone's time."

Transparency and genuine two-way communication are crucial components in ensuring patients get the care they need and deserve. Patients need to feel empowered to be able to share concerns about their care. Genuine two-way communication saves time and resources for both patients and the healthcare system, as when patients are prepared, they can make the most out of appointments.

Responses were varied in terms of two-way communication. Fewer than half (47%) of respondents said they had been provided, or had been able to easily access, the information they needed to care for themselves. Patients need to have ownership of and access to all the medical information that the health system holds about them if they are to be fully informed.

By improving two-way communication, the health system will be able to provide more transparent and personalised care and improve the overall patient experience.

Systemic failures in care coordination

"I have been waiting for appointments with a rheumatologist, a dermatologist and an ENT specialist for two and a half years."

The responses around care coordination reveal a fragmented system where patients are often left in the dark about their own care, struggling to navigate a complex and often unresponsive healthcare landscape.

Our findings show there are significant issues in the coordination and management of patient care:

- Only two-fifths (41%) of respondents agreed that care had been well coordinated, with fewer than a quarter (23%) disagreeing

- A little more than two-fifths (45%) agreed they had been kept informed about what is happening with their care, with a little less than one-fifth (19%) disagreeing
- Fewer than a half (47%) of respondents agreed they had been able to access the services they need, with around a quarter (24%) disagreeing.

Conclusion

The crisis in the NHS is multifaceted, affecting access, waiting times, care coordination, and communication.

While the dedication of NHS staff is evident, systemic issues are preventing them from delivering the level of care that patients need and deserve, and care that is safe.

As the new Government gets to grips with the NHS crisis, it is crucial that any reforms address not just individual symptoms of the crisis, but also the underlying structural issues that have led to the current crisis.

Patients need and deserve a healthcare system that is accessible, efficient, well-coordinated, and truly responsive to their needs.

The new Government must prioritise reversing the NHS crisis and delivering the quality of care that the British public deserves.

The Patients Association

The Patients Association is an independent patient charity campaigning for improvements in health and social care for patients.

Uniquely for a charity with a remit covering all health and care issues, we work with patients directly: they are our members and supporters, and the people who benefit from our help and information services. Through our helpline we provide information to thousands of people each year about the health and social care system.

Our purpose is to ensure that everybody can access and benefit from the health and care they need to live well, by ensuring that services are designed and delivered through equal partnership with patients.

Membership of the Patients Association is open to anyone interested in health and social care. If that's you, we'd love you to be a part of our growing community - [Join us today](#).

Our helpline is free and available to anyone with a question about their care or that of a loved one. You can contact our helpline team by email or phone (details below).

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